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Centralized Curricula and Classroom Realities: A Qualitative Study of EFL Pedagogy in Iran

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Abstract

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This qualitative study examined pedagogical practices in Iranian public secondary school English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) settings, in particular, the use of textbooks, language in the classroom, teaching strategies, and teacher agency. Drawing on 12 classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with 12 English teachers, it investigated the degree of adherence to the government-prescribed Vision textbook series, patterns and reasons for L1 (Persian) and L2 (English) use, methodological approaches used, and teacher agency within systemic constraints. Findings revealed a high dependence on textbooks and teacher manuals, little adaptation of the material, and heavy reliance on teacher-centered presentation-practice-production (PPP) approaches. In the classroom, Persian was used 65 percent of the interactions especially to support lower-proficiency learners. Institutional factors—centralized curricula, inadequate resources, exam-oriented culture, and teachers' limited language proficiency—curtail professional autonomy. Although many teachers are interested in communicative approaches, structural barriers prevent their adoption. The study highlights the need for context-sensitive teacher preparation, textbook revisions, and pedagogical flexibility to improve the effectiveness of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) in centralized education systems.

Keywords: textbook use, classroom language, teaching methodology, translanguaging, classroom observation

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1. Introduction

The English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) instruction in the Iranian public school system is part of a highly centralized system of education, where Ministry of Education (MoE) determines curricula, teaching materials, and even instructional approaches. The core component of this system is the Vision textbook series, the main source of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) at the secondary school level. Although these textbooks are designed to promote communicative competence, the implementation of communicative language teaching (CLT) in practice is usually lower than expected due to systemic issues such as high numbers of students in a class, exam-oriented culture, insufficient teacher training, and limited resources (Farhady & Hedayati, 2009a; Moradkhani & Haghi, 2017; Safari & Razmjoo, 2016).

Textbooks play a central role in Iranian EFL classrooms, not only as a source of instructional material, but also as a de facto lesson plan. Sheldon (1988) described textbooks as the visible heart of language programs, which is also a valid description in the Iranian context. Nevertheless, studies have indicated that excessive dependence on the prescribed materials may negatively affect the flexibility and innovation of instruction (Jahangard, 2007; Soroush, 2017). Although one group of teachers strictly adheres to the textbook, others seek to modify or supplement the material according to the needs of learners and the realities of the classroom (Atai & Mazlum, 2013; Shariati & Nejadghanbar, 2020).

Another important point in EFL pedagogy is the use of language in the classroom, especially the ratio between the first language (L1, Persian) and the second language (L2, English). Although the prevailing language education theories tend to focus on exclusive use of L2, a pragmatic approach to code switching is widely used by Iranian teachers to ensure comprehension and keep the classroom active, particularly among learners with lower proficiency (Rahimi & Abedini, 2012; Turnbull & Dailey-O Cain, 2009). Institutional needs, pedagogical principles, and the level of student proficiency affect this language choice (Ebrahimi, 2017).

The pedagogical approaches in the Iranian TEFL classrooms reflect a mixed culture of the local and the global trends. However, even though CLT is endorsed by educational policy, it does not seem to be implemented in classrooms as most teachers predominantly employ traditional approaches such as the presentation-practice-production (PPP) model and grammar-translation strategies (Hosseini & Ketabi, 2020; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The teachers in this context are influenced by curriculum instructions, instructional handbooks, their training experiences, and underlying teaching philosophies.

Although there is an increasing amount of research on textbook use, language policy, and teaching methodology in Iran, these aspects have been

examined separately in many cases. While it is understood that teachers rely heavily on textbooks, and largely adhere to traditional instructional methods, there is a paucity of research on how these pedagogical elements interact within actual classroom settings. Furthermore, little has been done to focus on the teachers' own reasoning and decision-making regarding materials, language use, and methodology within a centralized and assessment-driven system.

This paper aimed to address these gaps by undertaking a classroom-based, qualitative investigation of how Iranian TEFL teachers deal with the interrelated requirements of curriculum, instructional material, language use, and methodology. In doing so, it highlights how broader policy objectives are interpreted, adapted, and reshaped by teachers in the context of the limitations and realities of their classrooms.

Although the policy level expects the development of communicative competence by using the Vision textbook series, the classroom activities in Iranian state high schools are still influenced by the centralized curricula, exam-based instructional mandates, and limited material resources. Such systemic conditions provide a pedagogical context in which teachers are required to follow the prescribed materials strictly, rely heavily on L1 to make sure that the students understand, and employ traditional PPP routines instead of communicative methods. However, little is known about how teachers actually deal with these limitations or how the learning environment is shaped by their limited agency, methodological decisions, classroom language choices, and textbook use. This lack of integrated, classroom-based evidence constitutes a practical problem for policymakers and teacher educators striving to align instructional practices with communicative goals.

The purpose of the study was to investigate the pedagogical practices of Iranian EFL teachers in the centralized curriculum system in the public high schools. This research used a qualitative approach involving classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with teachers to shed light on the implementation of national policies in the day-to-day teaching practices. The research may provide deeper insights into curriculum implementation, teacher agency, and context-sensitive language teaching in centralized and resource-scarce education systems. To make the research clear and consistent with the objectives of the study, the following focused questions are addressed:

1. How do Iranian state high school EFL teachers use the Vision textbooks in their classroom practice?
2. What are the methodological preferences of the instructional practices of these teachers?
3. How and why do teachers use L1 (Persian) and L2 (English) in classroom interaction?

4. How much agency do teachers have in adapting materials and instructional practices in the centralized educational system?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Textbook Use in Iranian EFL Classrooms

Textbooks in EFL education are integral to classroom teaching especially in centralized education systems such as Iran's. They are not only content providers but also the framework of the lessons (Sheldon, 1988). In Iran, the Vision textbook series, prescribed by the government, plays an official role as the teaching resource in all public secondary schools, and influences the delivery of the curriculum and the pedagogical practice (Atai & Mazlum, 2013; Jahangard, 2007). Although the textbooks are aimed at including communicative aspects, many researchers have claimed that these textbooks are still form-focused and, thus, do not offer many opportunities for communication (Asadi & Amani, 2025; Ghorbani, 2011; Riazi & Mosallanejad, 2010; Sadeghi, 2024). The concerns are still validated by recent evaluations. As an example, Asadi and Amani (2025) indicate that Vision 1 still focuses on grammatical accuracy at the expense of communication. On the same note, Sadeghi (2024) emphasizes that the fact that texts are not authentic limits the possibility of student interaction, which affects the use of the PPP framework by teachers.

One of the major areas of research in EFL education has been the extent to which teachers adhere to textbooks. Although some studies have found a high dependence on prescribed textbooks because of institutional pressure and teacher accountability (Shariati & Nejadghanbar, 2020; Soroush, 2017), others have reported cases of adaptation of materials when teachers feel that the textbook content is misaligned with students' needs (Atai & Mazlum, 2013). Nevertheless, these adaptations are usually based on the teachers' professional autonomy, their pedagogical beliefs, and their teaching experience (Richards, 2013).

2.2. Classroom Language Choice (L1 vs. L2)

Another theme that is prominent in EFL pedagogy is language choice in the classroom, that is, whether to use L1 (Persian) or L2 (English). Although the language teaching literature is inclined to focus on maximizing use of the target language, in actual classroom contexts, the strategic use of the L1 is often required (Turnbull & Dailey-O Cain, 2009). A study by Iranian researchers confirms that the majority of teachers resort to code-switching to explain difficult material, manage classroom relationships, or connect with the students (Amiri & Abdollahi Saryazdi, 2024; Ebrahimi, 2017; Rahimi & Abedini, 2012). Salimi et al. (2024) also show that the beliefs of teachers regarding translanguaging constitute a decisive factor in the language use in

the classroom. According to their research, it is becoming more and more evident that translanguaging is no longer seen as a weakness, but rather as a pedagogical tool, although overreliance may still reduce students' exposure to L2. While such practice can lead to comprehension, excessive use can restrict L2 fluency of students (Shahnazari-Dorcheh, 2014).

In line with this, Ghafarpour and Biria (2023) found minimal L1-to-L2 transfer in Iranian EFL writing tasks, suggesting that while L1 supports initial scaffolding, targeted L2 strategies are essential to overcome proficiency gaps—echoing our observed 60–70% Persian use for task clarification without hindering eventual L2 production.

2.3. Teaching Methodologies in Iranian EFL Context

Although the world today is paying more and more attention to CLT, in Iranian EFL classrooms, traditional approaches (i.e., PPP, grammar-translation, and audio-lingual models) remain dominant (Hosseini & Ketabi, 2020; Moradkhani & Haghi, 2017). Researchers have also noted that the practice of CLT is especially challenging to apply in the Iranian context due to institutional limitations, such as exam-based teaching, big classes, and inaccessibility to teacher training (Farhady & Hedayati, 2009b; Khodamoradi, 2024; Safari & Rashidi, 2015). More recently, Seirafi et al. (2025) have found that even Iranian learners themselves are not convinced of the feasibility of CLT in overcrowded classes, which confirms earlier claims that systemic constraints are still decisive. This supports the conclusion of Khodamoradi (2024) that the support of the policy is not enough to overcome the exam-driven pedagogical practices. There is still a significant gap between what is planned in the curriculum and what actually happens in the classroom (Seirafi et al., 2025).

Recent research in Iranian EFL settings similarly reveals that teachers' beliefs often constrain the shift from traditional methods, with 89% of participants misunderstanding critical pedagogy as a rigid, authority-based approach rather than a tool for social transformation (Salimi & Khazaei Kouhpar, 2024).

The overarching nature of PPP and grammar-translation approaches reflects the exam-driven and accuracy-focused orientation of the Iranian public EFL curriculum (Safari & Razmjoo, 2016). Although teachers expressed a willingness to adopt communicative methods, they have limited agency due to institutional pressures, lack of resources, and lack of professional development (Atai & Mazlum, 2013; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The limited production phase that was observed indicates that student autonomy and authentic communication opportunities have not been fully developed.

2.4. Teacher Agency in Pedagogical Decisions

Teacher agency is of great importance in mediating pedagogical decision-making. Research on this issue underlines that although curricular structures appear rigid, teachers do not perform the role of a mere conduit but interpret policy and regularly mediate between policy and local classroom needs (Priestley et al., 2015). However, the Iranian context may limit teacher agency because of policymaking monopolization and the lack of access to professional development (Moradkhani & Haghi, 2017; Safari & Rashidi, 2015). This is supported by the recent studies. As an illustration, Seirafi et al. (2025) suggest that the lack of agency in teachers can be traced to the top-down requirements on the exam and strictly followed curricular design, albeit with occasional instances of negotiation in the classroom.

2.5. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on the ecological theory of teacher agency developed by Priestley et al. (2015) which views agency as an outcome of the interaction among an individual's personal capacities, cultural conditions, and structural constraints. Agency, in this view, is seen as being influenced by contextual factors such as curricular mandates, institutional expectations, and classroom realities. Therefore, rather than viewing agency as a fixed personal trait, it is viewed as being shaped by the context in which teachers operate. This conceptualization fits well with the Iranian EFL system, as centralized policies and test-oriented assessments limit the extent to which teachers can make decisions about their own teaching practices; however, there is still some degree of flexibility for teachers to engage in micro-level negotiation and adaptation.

A complementary theoretical lens is provided by sociocultural theory, especially Vygotskian notions of mediated learning and the functional role of L1 in scaffolding understanding (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). Within this perspective, teachers' use of Persian can be interpreted as a mediational tool that enables learners to make sense of new linguistic forms and classroom tasks, particularly in large, mixed-proficiency classes. This provides a conceptual basis for analyzing L1/L2 dynamics as instructional choices shaped by both learner needs and structural constraints. Together, the ecological model of agency and sociocultural views of mediation offer a coherent foundation for interpreting teachers' navigation of textbook demands, methodological expectations, classroom language choices, and institutional limitations.

2.6. Integration and Gap in the Literature

Despite the fact that each of these areas, including textbook use, language choice, teaching methodology, and teacher agency, have been studied

individually, a gap in the literature exists that integrates them into single framework. Little is known about the way in which teachers negotiate these aspects in practice, especially in centralized, resource-constrained educational systems such as Iran.

This paper answers these four research questions: textbook use and adaptation, classroom language choice, teaching methodology, and teacher agency, and emphasizes the interrelationship between these factors in real classroom contexts. In this way, it provides an integrated, classroom-level view of pedagogical practice.

The literature review presented here is organized around these four primary research questions, and each of the aspects of pedagogical practice explored in Iranian public high school EFL classrooms is presented with appropriate evidence and discussion. This framework provides an understanding of the realities of TEFL practice and adds to the current debates of teacher autonomy, curriculum change, and educational equity in similar contexts.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

The current study used a qualitative instrumental case study design (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995) that enables a detailed exploration of the pedagogical practices in Iranian public high school EFL classrooms. The instrumental case study approach was chosen because the aim was not to describe individual classrooms but to learn how teachers negotiate and implement curriculum, language use, and methodology within a centralized education system. This design enabled the collection of rich, contextually grounded data about teacher decision-making, interactions with the prescribed textbooks, and adaptation strategies.

The qualitative case study design was especially suitable as it enables the use of various data sources, in-depth analysis of actual classroom practices, and investigation of the interaction between institutional constraints and teacher agency. The research also followed the interpretive paradigm, which sought to understand the views of teachers and the meanings they assign to their teaching decisions.

3.2. Participants and Context

The study was conducted in four public high schools in a single urban district of Iran. Twelve English teachers were purposively sampled: six males and six females, including eight experienced teachers (more than five years of teaching experience) and four less experienced teachers (one to three years). All participants held at least a bachelor's degree in English language teaching,

were familiar with the Vision textbook series, and had experience working within the centralized curriculum.

Purposive sampling was selected because it was necessary to make sure that the participants were familiar with the phenomenon under study and could offer rich and relevant information regarding the use of textbooks, classroom language choices, teaching methodologies, and agency within institutionalized constraints. Although the sample is not representative of all Iranian public schools, it provides transferable insights for similar urban, exam-oriented contexts.

The participating teachers taught grades 10-12, and the schools were similar in terms of curricular policies, institutional constraints, and classroom conditions, including classes with 30-35 students, limited teaching resources, and strict exam-based mandates. This contextual homogeneity facilitated cross-case comparison and allowed a focus on the interplay between centralized policy and teacher agency.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected using two complementary instruments: classroom observations and semi-structured interviews.

3.3.1. Classroom Observations

Each of the twelve teachers was observed in a single 90-minute session, for a total of twelve sessions.

A structured observation protocol was developed specifically for this study, based on the four research questions. The protocol included sections on

1. Textbook use and adaptation (adherence, modifications, use of supplementary resources)
2. Classroom language choice (proportion of L1, L2, and code-switching)
3. Teaching methodology (PPP phases, teacher-centered vs. student-centered activities)
4. Each item in the protocol included descriptive indicators and rating scales to ensure consistent coding.
5. The protocol was piloted with two teachers outside the sample to ensure clarity and practicality, and
6. Detailed field notes were recorded during observations, including teacher talk, classroom interactions, and pedagogical decisions.

3.3.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

All twelve teachers participated in semi-structured interviews lasting 30–45 minutes.

The interview schedule included 10–12 open-ended questions aligned with the research questions, focusing on textbook use and adaptation,

rationales for L1/L2 choices, teaching methodology and instructional strategies, instances of exercising teacher agency within systemic constraints.

Interviews were conducted in Persian to maximize clarity and comfort, then transcribed and translated into English. A bilingual researcher cross-checked the translations to ensure accuracy, while acknowledging that some nuances may have been lost.

Together, these instruments provided triangulated perspectives on classroom practice, allowing the study to capture the interplay between centralized curriculum mandates, pedagogical decision-making, and teacher agency.

3.4. Data Analysis

Both the classroom observation notes and the interview transcripts were examined using thematic analysis, based on the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). To begin with, familiarization was done by transcribing all data, reading them several times, and annotating them. Second, preliminary codes were created. A combined approach was employed: the four research questions (textbook use and adaptation, classroom language choice, teaching methodology, and teacher agency) were used to derive deductive codes, and inductive codes were obtained due to unexpected patterns and teachers' own narratives.

Third, similar codes were grouped into categories and possible themes, including, but not limited to, textbook adherence vs. modification, strategic use of L1, constraints on communicative teaching and instances of teacher negotiation. Fourth, themes were reviewed and refined and data in the interviews were compared with the notes made in observation to maintain consistency of data (triangulation). Fifth, themes were clearly defined and named and sixth, illustrative extracts of teacher interviews and field notes were chosen to represent the findings.

To enhance the dependability of the analysis, 25 percent of the data (three interview transcripts and two observation protocols) were coded by two researchers using the same coding framework. Inter-coder agreement was 86% and disagreements were discussed until full consensus was achieved. This procedure increased the reliability of the coding process and minimized possibility of bias.

3.5. Rigor in Qualitative Research

In order to achieve rigor in this qualitative research, the four most common criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were used (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Fraenkel et al., 2019).

Credibility: Several strategies were employed to create credibility. The triangulation of data was done through the comparison of observation notes and interview transcripts. Member checking was done through sharing of interview summaries with the participants who confirmed accuracy and clarified ambiguities. Moreover, peer debriefing with a colleague who has experience in qualitative research was used to narrow down coding categories.

Transferability: The research context, participants, and classroom settings were described in detail, and the reader could determine on the applicability of the findings to similar contexts. Although the research was confined to a single district, the study is richly contextualized, which enhances the transferability.

Dependability: To ensure dependability, the research process had an audit trail which consisted of observation protocols, interview schedules, coding manuals, and a decision memo. Through this documentation, the process will be transparent and can be followed or replicated by other researchers. Dependability was further improved with inter-coder reliability checks (reported in Section 3.4).

Confirmability: The researcher recorded his assumptions, decisions and potential biases during data collection and analysis using reflexive journaling. The actual words and classroom behaviors of the participants were used to code and develop themes, which ensured that the interpretations were based on the data and not on the preconceptions of the researcher.

This systematic approach to these four criteria proves that the study has methodological rigor and that the results are reliable, well-founded, and useful in learning about pedagogical practices in centralized EFL settings.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The affiliated university gave ethical approval. All participants gave informed consent and were assured anonymity and confidentiality. Participation was voluntary and the participants were allowed to withdraw any time.

4. Results and Discussion

In order to give a concise summary of the results, Table 1 summarizes the trends of textbook use, language choice, and teaching methodologies among the twelve teachers observed.

Table 1*Summary of Pedagogical Practices and Teacher Agency across 12 Teachers*

| Teacher | Textbook adherence | L1 use (% of teacher talk) | L2 use (% of teacher talk) | Code-switching (% of teacher talk) | Teaching methodology & Teacher Agency |
|---------|---|----------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| A | High (minimal adaptation) | 65 | 20 | 15 | PPP (textbook-driven); Extended speaking activities |
| B | High (minimal adaptation) | 70 | 20 | 10 | PPP (textbook-driven); No adaptation observed |
| C | High (minimal adaptation) | 60 | 20 | 20 | PPP (exam-focused); No adaptation observed |
| D | High (minimal adaptation) | 65 | 20 | 15 | PPP (textbook-driven); Followed manual closely |
| E | Moderate (some speaking adaptations) | 60 | 25 | 15 | PPP with minor production phase; Adapted speaking tasks |
| F | High (minimal adaptation) | 70 | 20 | 10 | PPP (textbook-driven); L1 used strategically for comprehension |
| G | High (minimal adaptation) | 65 | 20 | 15 | PPP (textbook-driven); Adjusted pacing |
| H | Moderate (writing adaptations) | 60 | 25 | 15 | PPP with minor production phase; Modified writing tasks |
| I | High (minimal adaptation) | 68 | 20 | 12 | PPP (exam-focused); No adaptation observed |
| J | High (minimal adaptation) | 66 | 20 | 14 | PPP (textbook-driven); Followed manual closely |
| K | Moderate (speaking/writing adaptations) | 62 | 25 | 13 | PPP with minor production phase; Modified writing & speaking |
| L | High (minimal adaptation) | 69 | 20 | 11 | PPP (textbook-driven); Extended speaking activities |

Note. Percentages are approximate, based on utterance categorization during observations. “High” adherence indicates strict textbook use; “Moderate” indicates minor adaptations (e.g., extended speaking/writing tasks). L1 includes Persian-only teacher talk; code-switching refers to English statements followed by Persian translations. Teacher Agency refers to small-scale adaptations such as extending speaking activities, modifying writing tasks, or adjusting pacing.

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Textbook Use and Adaptation

Classroom observations showed that 75 percent of the 12 teachers closely adhered to the Vision textbook, following the lesson sequence step by step. Adaptations were minimal and mainly related to speaking and writing activities, for instance introducing alternative dialogue topics (Vision 3, Lesson 1, p. 33) or prolonging exercises on infinitive sentence-writing (Vision 2, Lesson 3, p. 105). None of the teachers used supplementary resources such as videos, online materials, and authentic texts. This was attributed to three key constraints in interviews:

1. Curricular requirements: Teachers indicated that the Ministry of Education (MoE) requires coverage of all sections of the textbook
2. Exam oriented instruction: End of the year exams were directly aligned with the textbook content.
3. Limited resources and instructional time: many classrooms did not have teaching aids such as projectors and computers, and classes were only 90 minutes.

These findings were corroborated by teachers’ views. As one teacher noted: “The textbook is our roadmap — if I don’t follow it, I’ll fall behind and supervisors won’t be happy.” (Teacher D). Another emphasized: “I extend speaking activities for confidence, but I can’t bring supplemental material because exams and time leave no space for that.” (Teacher A)

4.1.2. Classroom Language Use (L1 vs. L2)

Teachers chiefly used English for delivering simple classroom instructions (e.g., “Open your books”, “Work in pairs”) and reading textbook examples. However, grammar and vocabulary explanations were predominantly conducted by Persian (L1), and code-switching was common even during English based instruction. The average teacher talk consisted of:

- 20% English (instructions, textbook dialogues)
- 60–70% Persian (grammar and vocabulary explanations, task clarification)
- 10–20% code-switching (English statements followed by Persian translations)

These percentages were approximated by classifying and counting the teacher utterances during observations, according to the structured observation protocol. Teachers' use of English was mostly limited to controlled textbook dialogues, making up 90% of their speaking during observed activities, with very little spontaneous L2 production. Teachers acknowledged this imbalance but rationalized it as necessary for comprehension and classroom management, especially with large classes (up to 35 students) and with beginner-level learners: "If I only speak English, many students get lost. Persian makes things clearer when they are hard to understand." (Teacher F)

4.1.3. Teaching Methodologies and Teacher Manual Influence

Every lesson observed was based on the Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP) framework as outlined in the Vision teacher manuals. The lessons were characterized by teacher-centered presentation and controlled practice phases (e.g. grammar drills, audio repetition, and written exercises).

Only two of the twelve classrooms observed had opportunities of free production like open-ended speaking or writing tasks. Most teachers indicated that they relied heavily on the teacher's manual due to MoE expectations and acquaintance with exam-oriented grammar tasks: "We are trained to do it this way — present, practice, then maybe production if there's time." (Teacher G). "Exams measure accuracy rather than fluency; thus PPP is more effective." (Teacher C)

Teachers were interested in more communicative, student-centered methods, although they cited systemic barriers, such as time, large classes, and lack of training in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

4.1.4. Teacher Agency

The observations and interviews in the classroom revealed that teachers had limited but meaningful opportunities to exercise agency in the centralized system. Although strict adherence to the Vision textbook and teacher manual dominated, there were small-scale adaptations made by some teachers, especially in speaking and writing activities, showing their professional judgment and sensitivity to the needs of students. As an example, Teacher A prolonged speaking activities to build confidence, and Teacher K modified writing activities to the level of learner proficiency.

Teachers said that their agency was limited by exam alignment, resource constraints and inflexible curricular requirements, yet they still managed to negotiate between policy and classroom realities:

- Regulating the pace of activities according to student comprehension.
- Strategically using L1 or code-switching to ensure it is understood
- Adjusting small details of the lesson sequence while remaining within the given content.

These practices show that despite the centralized and exam-driven contexts, teachers have some kind of agency, negotiating between the institutional requirements and the learning needs of students.

4.2. Discussion

4.2.1. Teachers' Use and Adaptation of the Prescribed Vision Textbooks

The strict adherence to textbooks reflects the features of centralized curricula in Iran where textbooks serve as both the curriculum and primary resource (Riazi & Mosalanejad, 2010). Although minor adaptations suggest that teachers are aware of students' communicative needs (Tomlinson, 2012), their limited scope implies that they do not have much pedagogical autonomy. The alignment of exams and the unavailability of supplementary materials are examples of constraints that deter instructional experimentation and pedagogical innovation, which are supported by the results of Farhady and Hedayati (2009b) and Safari and Rashidi (2015). According to the recent evaluations of Vision textbooks, there is high adherence with low communicative adaptation because of the exam pressures (Asadi & Amani, 2025; Sadeghi, 2024). These results are reflected in Seirafi et al. (2025), who demonstrate that even students find the Vision textbooks to be limiting, as they observe that the alignment of exams limits the possibility of creative work with English.

These results are in line with the ecological model of teacher agency, which claims that teachers' agency is not a fixed attribute but an outcome of teachers' interactions with structural conditions (e.g., institutional structures). The use of the Vision textbooks as the primary resource, the lack of flexibility in what can be done in this classroom (i.e., limited adaptation), and the strict implementation of PPP illustrate how institutional constraints restrict teachers' ability to choose from the wide array of teaching methods they may have at their disposal. Within this ecological framing, the minor adjustments observed—such as extending speaking activities or modifying writing tasks—represent situated, micro-level expressions of agency that occur despite restrictive policy environments.

4.2.2. Teachers' Choices Between Persian (L1) and English (L2) in Classroom Interaction

The extensive use of L1 is associated with studies that found code-switching to be a useful scaffolding technique in low proficiency EFL contexts (Macaro, 2005; Turnbull & Dailey-O Cain, 2009). Although it guarantees comprehension and maintains the schedule of lessons, excessive use of L1 can decrease the meaningful exposure to English (Macaro, 2014) thereby hampering the acquisition of communicative competence. Similar patterns have been reported in Iranian state schools (Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006). The

recent discourse-based research (Amiri & Abdollahi Saryazdi, 2024; Salimi et al., 2024) proves that code-switching is a common and strategic option. Nevertheless, they also warn that in case L1 use prevails, learners may lose the chance of having an authentic communicative practice. These results suggest that teachers should be offered professional development to enable them to use more L2 without affecting clarity (Salimi et al., 2024).

Teachers' extensive use of Persian can also be interpreted from a sociocultural perspective, in which L1 is used as a mediating tool for facilitating students' comprehension and task engagement. Consistent with Vygotsky's perspective, the strategic use of L1 in the classroom seems to be an attempt at scaffolding understanding in situations in which proficiency is low, class sizes are large and instructional time is limited. This theoretical framing clarifies why teachers view L1 use not as a deviation from communicative principles but as a practical response to contextual and cognitive demands.

4.2.3. Teachers' Application of Teaching Methodologies Within Systemic Constraints

The general nature of PPP and grammar-translation approaches reflect the exam-driven and accuracy-focused orientation of the Iranian public EFL curriculum (Safari & Razmjoo, 2016). Even though teachers are willing to adopt communicative methods, they have limited agency by institutional pressures, resource scarcity, and lack of professional development (Atai & Mazlum, 2013; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The limited production phase that was observed indicates that student autonomy and authentic communication opportunities have not been fully developed.

4.2.4. Teachers' Exercise of Agency in Navigating Centralized Curriculum Policies

Teacher agency as the capacity of teachers to make choices and modify instruction within institutional constraints turned into a critical factor of classroom practices. Even though teachers followed the Vision textbooks and the recommended PPP methodology strictly, they exercised subtle forms of agency by making small adjustments to accommodate students' needs. As an example, educators prolonged speaking tasks, changed the subject of dialogue, or altered writing tasks even with limited resources and exam-oriented pressures: "I extend speaking activities for confidence, but I can't bring supplemental material because exams and time leave no space for that." (Teacher A)

These adaptations suggest that teachers have to move between policy mandates and classroom realities, and negotiate instructional choices to maximize student engagement. Nevertheless, the extent of agency was limited by a number of structural factors: the centralized curriculum, strict exams, big

classes, and inaccessibility to professional development. Even experienced teachers with strong pedagogical beliefs found their autonomy restricted in daily practice.

The findings confirm that teacher agency in Iranian public high schools is practiced in subtle, context-sensitive ways, which tend to be micro-level adjustments, as opposed to systemic innovation. The decision-making process of teachers is a balancing act: to follow the top-down mandates and to address the immediate needs of students. This is consistent with the ecological model of teacher agency by Priestley et al. (2015), in which agency is determined by the interaction of personal capacity, institutional structures, and time.

The limited autonomy of the teachers Viewed through the ecological theory of agency as not only a matter of choice but a result of structural, cultural, and material constraints that mediate the instructional decisions. The centralized curriculum, exam-oriented system and lack of professional development limits the "affordances" teachers have, determining the type of agency they can exercise. The minor adjustments in this research, such as adjusting pacing, adding minimal speaking tasks, or minor changes in textbook activities, are compatible with the ecological concept of situated agency, in which teachers are situated within but not completely beyond the systemic boundaries.

4.2.5. Insights From the Ecological Model of Teacher Agency

Considering the results through the Ecological Model by Priestley et al. (2015), it becomes clear that teacher agency is a limited but strong process in the EFL classrooms of Iran. Intentionality is facilitated by personal capabilities, including the expressed interest of teachers in CLT (e.g. the adaptations of Teachers A and K), but constrained by structural limitations such as exam alignment and resource scarcity, which only allow micro-level changes (e.g. extending speaking tasks). Temporal factors, including lesson pacing and proficiency levels, further shape choices: L1 dominance (60–70%) acts as an affordance for immediate comprehension, aligning with the model's emphasis on context-sensitive negotiation rather than heroic individualism.

This application extends the framework by highlighting EFL-specific ecologies: Centralized textbooks as "structural scripts" (Richards, 2013) that both constrain and scaffold agency, and translanguaging as a socio-cultural affordance bridging L1/L2 divides (Salimi et al., 2024). Unlike Western contexts where agency often yields innovation (Priestley et al., 2015), here it manifests as "bounded activism"—subtle resistances (e.g., pacing adjustments) within exam-driven temporalities. These insights underscore a theoretical tension: While the model predicts iterative agency, systemic inequities in the Global South amplify structural dominance, reducing opportunities for transformative practice (Safari & Rashidi, 2015).

4.2.6. Integration of Findings

There was a pattern of limited teacher agency across all data sources. Teachers followed closely the textbook and teacher's manual with minimal adaptation. Persian was widely used to facilitate comprehension, but teachers knew that it reduced English exposure. The PPP model was predominant in lesson structure, which was based on exam requirements and teacher training, but it restricted communicative opportunities. Teachers exercised subtle forms of agency through minor adaptations to speaking and writing activities, demonstrating context-sensitive decision-making within structural constraints. Teachers exercised limited forms of agency, adapting tasks, pacing, and classroom language to suit learner needs despite systemic constraints.

The findings show that there is an interrelation between textbook dependency, L1 dominance, PPP methodology, and teacher agency. Centralized policies, exam pressures, and resource limitations strongly influence classroom practices, but teachers still negotiate instructional choices to meet students' needs. For example, although the strict adherence to the Vision textbook restricts communicative activities, the small-scale modifications made by teachers, like prolonging speaking exercises or adjusting the dialogue topics, are the acts of agency within the constraints of the exam-oriented PPP model.

Moreover, personal factors such as pedagogical beliefs and professional experience of teachers contribute to their willingness to change materials or use communicative techniques. Nevertheless, systemic constraints tend to prevail over these. These findings align with the existing literature on the influence of centralized policies and exams on Iranian EFL pedagogy (Gholami & Zare-ee, 2013; Riazi & Mosalanejad, 2010) and contribute to the discussion by showing how teacher agency is manifested in small, micro-level changes instead of macro-level innovations.

Integrating findings explicitly in terms of the four research questions shows how each of pedagogical elements interacts: the use of textbooks, language choice, teaching methodology, and teacher agency influence one another, and the overall classroom experience. Teachers' interest to engage in interactive and communicative practices is a sign of willingness to change provided that systemic obstacles (class size, resource constraints, and exam orientation) are overcome.

In theory, these patterns are the essence of the Ecological Model: Interdependent factors produce an emergent agency, in which textbook dependence and PPP restrict production phases, but L1 strategies and minor adaptations show teachers' capacity to reconfigure their professional space (Priestley et al., 2015). This holistic view reveals agency not as deficit but as adaptive resilience, informing future theorizing on EFL ecologies.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The paper addressed pedagogical practices in Iranian public secondary TEFL classrooms in terms of textbook reliance, classroom language use, and instructional methodologies. The findings indicate that there is a high degree of reliance on the Vision textbook and teacher manuals, and minimal adaptation because of centralized curricular requirements, examination pressures, and resource deficits. Persian (L1) is the dominant language in the classroom, and it is used as a practical tool of understanding and classroom management, but English (L2) is restricted to controlled textbook activities. Teaching methods are still based on the teacher-centered PPP model, which indicates the exam-oriented priorities and the limited pedagogical autonomy. The discussion and implications below address each of the four research questions to ensure that policy and practice recommendations are directly connected to the observed classroom phenomena.

Despite the interest of many teachers in communicative and learner-centered approaches, structural limitations, such as large classes, rigid curricula and inadequate training are major impediments to methodological innovation. This gap between the policy-level expectations of communicative competence and the classroom realities highlights the influence of institutional constraints on practices of the teachers and students' exposure to authentic English communication.

The Vision series should be revised in order to incorporate communicative tasks and flexible, modular content that can be tailored to the needs of different students. Supplementary resources, such as authentic texts, internet tools, and interactive activities should be available to foster innovation apart from textbook-based teaching

Continuous, context-sensitive professional development is required to provide teachers with the means of implementing communicative language teaching (CLT) in resource-limited settings. The training must be based on the practical techniques of L1/L2 balance, adaptation of PPP routines, and promotion of student interaction.

High-stakes tests that currently focus on discrete-point grammar and vocabulary should incorporate communicative tasks, such as speaking and writing, to encourage communicative-oriented instructional practices.

Teachers are to usually identified as active agents in educational reform. Increased curricular flexibility and involvement in decision-making processes can help teachers to adapt teaching to their students' contexts without fear of penalization. Smaller classes, better classroom facilities, and access to multimedia tools would make the environment more conducive to interactive and student-centered teaching.

Further studies can be conducted on the students' point of view on the use of textbooks and classroom interaction to give a more comprehensive

picture of the TEFL experience. Incorporating student surveys or interviews could reveal how textbook reliance, L1 use, and teaching methods affect learning outcomes and engagement. The effect of policy change or training interventions on teacher behavior could also be inspected using longitudinal studies. Also, a comparative study of public and private schools may provide some insight into the impact of institutional flexibility on pedagogy.

Although systemic constraints still restrict public TEFL classrooms in Iran, teachers' willingness to be more communicative and adaptive is an important opportunity for reform. Coordinated efforts in textbook development, teacher training, assessment redesign, and policy support, anchored in the classroom, realities can better align instructional practices with the goal of developing students' communicative competence. To determine the effectiveness of the current practices, future studies should examine their effects on student outcomes, including language fluency or exam performance.

Although located in the Iranian context, the findings may be relevant to other centralized, exam-oriented EFL systems in the Global South. As an example, similar issues of textbook dependency and limited teacher agency are evident in countries such as Pakistan where government classrooms tend to be textbook-centric, with teachers copying exam-style questions verbatim out of textbook exercises rather than adapting the content for communicative purposes (British Council, 2022). The implementation of CLT hampered by exam-based curricula, overcrowded classes, and resource constraints are other examples (Shaikh et al., 2024). In Egypt, communicative approaches are still hindered by large classes, high-stakes testing, and scarce resources, and most teachers are unfamiliar with CLT pedagogy despite supportive policy (Ibrahim & Ibrahim, 2017; Ibrahim & Ibrahim, 2023). The paper highlights the global challenge teachers face in having to reconcile communicative language teaching with classroom realities, especially in resource-limited settings. In this way, it contributes to international debates on teacher agency, curriculum adaptation, and educational change in English language teaching, and provide guidance to policymakers, teacher educators, and curriculum developers in comparable settings.

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